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HISTORY OF THE TEACHING OF HANDWRITING IN AMERICA

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The five periods.—The teaching of handwriting in America may be divided into five periods based on the dominant influence or interest at the time. These are the Colonial Period, 1600–1800; Transition Period, 1800–1850; Period of Independent Elaboration of American Systems, 1850–1890; Vertical-Writing Movement, 1890–1900; Combination of Commercial and Scientific Influences, 1900–1916.

COLONIAL PERIOD, 1600–1800

During this period English texts were almost exclusively used. The acquisition of writing skill was so highly esteemed that it was common to have schools devoted solely to the purpose of teaching this art. In spite of many handicaps of material and method Wickersham says (16, p. 205)¹ that handwriting was better taught than most subjects, and Ward says (15, p. 64) that, judged by some preserved specimens of the handwriting of the Colonial children, it was equal to, or better than, that of a later date. Littlefield (9, p. 81) reports two young men “licensed to teach writing.” Bates reports (1, pp. 403–18) Abiah Holbrook, master of South Writing School in Boston, at 100 pounds a year with 260 town children under his care and the information that his salary was “left for the most part unpaid for years together” and that “he paid back one fourth of his salary in taxes yearly.”

Methods and influence of materials.—During this period the methods of teaching handwriting were very uneconomical. This was due in large part to the crude materials available. The quill pen requiring so much of the master’s time to make and keep in order was a source of much wasted time. The necessity for setting individual copies also took time that might have been spent in

¹ Numbers refer to sources given in bibliography.

teaching the children to write. Birch bark was often used for copy-books because of the cost of paper, and where paper was used it was rough and dark (15, p. 64). In many cases children ruled their own paper with a lead plummet, the forerunner of the lead pencil. Ink was made of nut-galls bruised in water with rusty nails (16, p. 192). The invention of lithography affected the teaching of handwriting favorably by providing a medium for the presentation of examples of good penmanship. From this time on copy-slips or copy-books of some kind took the place to a large extent of the "copy-setting" by the master.

TRANSITION PERIOD, 1800-1850

With the reorganization of the government after the Revolution came a revulsion against everything English which extended to educational matters. This led to the attempt to provide American texts for the schools. Writing-books came into use containing ruled lines, but at first without copies. Steel pens superseded the goose quill and lead pencils the plummet. As the use of engraved copies became common, class instead of individual instruction was used, and the teacher, freed from quill pens and copy-setting, gave the lesson-time to criticism of the writing of the children.

Two separate influences are traceable during this period. Possibly the revulsion against England and the friendly attitude toward France had something to do with the adoption of Pestalozzi's theories as to the teaching of handwriting. These theories involved the use of an extreme synthetic method in the teaching. Four or five guiding lines resembling the staff in music were used to measure exactly the height of the letters, and spacing was regulated by vertical crosslines. The elementary strokes as slants, curves, loops, and turns were taught first and identified by number. These were joined by being written from dictation so as to make words. This is so characteristic a part of the method that one author says (11), "The teacher does not dictate a letter but pronounces in succession each element of the letter which the writer follows without thinking of the letter itself."

The second influence of this period is that of muscular-movement writing. Here the manner of writing was of first importance and

form took second place. This originated with Carstairs, of England. He developed quite an elaborate system of exercises to be used in training for the proper movement. The work was introduced into this country by B. F. Foster (6). He says that the system is "based on the unerring laws of nature as developed in the anatomy of the arms, hands, and fingers." The fundamental theory is that an easy, flowing hand is only possible by ease in the motion of the member of the body executing the movement. This is acquired by free action of the several parts found connected together for use in writing. Therefore the joints of fingers, wrist, and elbow are all brought into play, and the arm is the producer of the combined movement (6, p. xvii). The first consideration is freedom of movement without regard to form. A somewhat elaborate contrivance of tape harness holds the fingers in the correct position and without movement until the form has been learned. The forms of letters are explained and taught while the fingers are in the harness, and exercises in ovals are also given. Then the fingers are freed and may be used in the small details. The further statement is made that by this method writing is easily learned with small classes in twenty lessons of one hour each, provided the pupils practice from six to twelve hours a day (6, pp. xviii, xix). Variations of this method have had more or less influence in every course in handwriting which has been published. The principal variation in this factor has been in the amount of finger movement to be allowed. Some of the most extreme courses insist that there shall be absolutely no finger movement.

PERIOD OF INDEPENDENT ELABORATION OF AMERICAN SYSTEMS,
1850-1890

During the last period all the fundamental questions with regard to the teaching of handwriting were raised—the method of teaching, styles of writing, position, and desks. It remained for this period to attempt a solution of these questions. The first result of the work of this period appears in the combination of the two distinct types of the last period with different relative importance being given to the two factors by the different systems. The synthesis

which had been used in the teaching of letters was applied in the teaching of movement, where the plan was to teach the elementary movements first and to combine these into more complex movements. The combined arm, forearm, and finger movement of Carstairs became narrowed to the extreme arm movement, sometimes called the forearm or muscular movement.

A distinct type of letter forms also developed in this period. Spencer, one of the pioneers in this field, tells us concerning his system (14, p. 116): "The peculiarity of its prominent features consisted in selecting from nature the elliptical curve which nature most delights to employ—as adapted to the laws of motion—for its controlling model." With this curve as the basis was built up the letter style known as the Spencerian, from which most of the modern forms have been adapted. During this period came, too, the arranging of books in series graded to fit the stage of development of those who were to use them. This was one of the results of the adoption of a graded system in public schools where the number of children warranted the use of the plan.

At about this time the demand for more efficient writing led to the establishment of especial writing classes in commercial schools. From these schools there came a number of courses for the teaching of writing to be used in the public schools. The criticism which may be made about many of these courses is that their authors lacked direct contact with child-problems and so failed to adapt the work to the elementary stage of development.

THE VERTICAL-WRITING MOVEMENT, 1890-1900

From France and Germany first, and later in this country, came the agitation for vertical writing, its claims being based on superior hygienic conditions. It was soon evident that the front position and vertical writing did not remedy faults of posture or eyestrain, and it was found to be inefficient from the viewpoint of speed and legibility and so was abandoned. The front position of body was adopted into a number of succeeding systems, but a slant position of the paper was accepted as more desirable. The reaction was to a less extreme slant than that previously used.

COMBINATION OF COMMERCIAL AND SCIENTIFIC INFLUENCES,
1900-1916

The demand for efficiency in writing in both speed and form continued to be made in commercial situations. The development, chiefly in commercial schools, of drill methods included movement exercises and some use of rhythm by counting. These methods tended also to influence somewhat the teaching of public-school writing. The use of drill necessitated a larger amount of paper. This was supplied in some cases by practice pads or loose sheets in addition to the copy-book, and in some cases by the substitution of copy-slips with pads or loose sheets, for the old-style copy-book. The demand for speed resulted in a simplification of the form of the letters with an elimination of all nonessentials. In some systems this was carried to an extreme and all the beauty of the writing was lost.

As more definite training of teachers came to be required for all the work, the problem of training teachers for the teaching of handwriting became prominent. Some of the makers of handwriting systems provided for this by correspondence courses leading to diplomas, or certificates of proficiency, and many school systems required their teachers to secure such a certificate. Practically all systems at the present time give attention to both movement and form with different relative stress in the different systems.

Standardization through grading the product.—The many attempts to provide a course for the teaching of handwriting all seem to fail in certain fundamental requirements of a good teaching method. There is little provision for controlled observation or for testing the results of the work.

Scales and surveys.—The first attempts at such provision were made by educators entirely unrelated to any handwriting system. Dr. Thorndike and Dr. Ayres have produced scales based on differing principles for the scoring of the handwriting product. Dr. Freeman has organized a scale which, besides furnishing a basis for scoring the product, provides a means for analytical study which will lead to improvement of the technique. These scales have been used in surveys of handwriting. The Ayres Scale was

used in the grading of handwriting from the schools of fifty-six cities, and the averages from this survey have been accepted tentatively as the standard score for each grade in the elementary school. A number of other scales have recently been devised with the idea of meeting local needs or for use with a particular system. This objective study of the product is the first step in a scientific study of the subject and is probably of more value than any study which preceded it.

The next step in the scientific study of handwriting was an experimental study of the process involved. This work was begun in Europe and has been carried forward by Dr. C. H. Judd and by Dr. F. N. Freeman and his assistants. This work is important because if any degree of uniformity is ever to be established in the teaching of handwriting it will be through the influence of a study of the writing technique from the standpoint of efficiency. Early results of this study are reported in *The Teaching of Handwriting* (7). Recently the use of moving pictures of children's writing as a means of learning how they write; the formulation of hypotheses as to desirable changes to be made in their technique; the introduction of definite training to produce these results; and a comparison of the results, as shown by means of moving pictures, with the original writing have been used as a means of determining desirable procedure. As an auxiliary method of analyzing the technique a modification of the Judd tracer has been used to determine the relation of finger and arm movement to quality of writing. The results of this work seem to indicate that good position and free rhythmic movement are important factors in efficient handwriting. The principles developed here were incorporated in an experimental course which has been used under conditions of a scientific experiment for one year in the public schools. The study of the results of this experiment is reported in a Master's thesis at the University of Chicago.

It seems probable that from this objective study by scale and this experimental study of the process the teaching of handwriting may reach a degree of standardization as to method of teaching and quality of performance that will lead to greater efficiency than is possible at present.

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